

# HIGHER EDUCATION UPDATE

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News from the

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## *Toward a Greater Understanding of the State's Educational Equity Policies, Programs, and Practices: Schools as a Resource in Realizing the Commission's Vision of the California of Tomorrow*

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THIS series of seven Higher Education Updates (with accompanying Fact Sheets) explores California's policies, programs, and practices designed to provide all our students with an equal opportunity to pursue their educational goals -- goals that benefit both the individual and our state. The Commission's intention in publishing this series is to enhance understanding among all Californians and our policy makers about the importance of educational equity to our State's future. Beginning in April, 1997, the Commission will be publishing a Higher Education Update approximately every two months through April, 1998. At that time, the series will conclude with the publication of an Update that presents a set of options for the State to consider for furthering our goal of educational opportunity for all Californians.

To date, this series has focused on describing the Commission's vision of the California of tomorrow in light of the realities of our state's past and present. In large measure, the changing demographics of our state, coupled with the opportunities and challenges that they present, have served as the foundation for our vision. The last installment discussed the two outcomes expected from education if our state is to become this vision:

- ♦ All students must learn traditional academic skills and competencies that are demanded in the marketplace;
- ♦ All students must learn skills to participate effectively in a democratic society -- a society increasingly heterogeneous in terms of people and ideas.

In this Update, the focus is on the teaching/learning process and the experiences that our students encounter through their first 13 years of education. The fundamental question explored is the extent to which our schools have the capacity to provide equitable educational opportunities for all our children in order that they can develop their talents and abilities to the maximum degree possible for the benefit of our state and their own futures. The importance of this question was succinctly stated by Plato long ago:

The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life (Plato, *The Republic*, IV, 425-B).

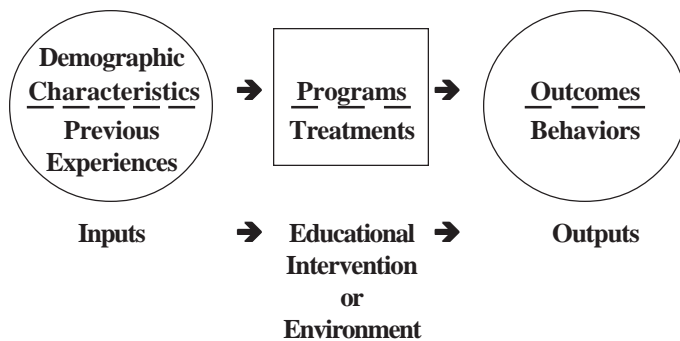
There are two accompanying Fact Sheets to this Update:

- ♦ *Schooling in California* -- a picture of the extent to which our schools currently provide equitable educational experiences for students throughout the state;
- ♦ *Preparation of California High School Students for College* -- a portrait of the academic outcomes of our students in California's schools.

Coupled with the description of the characteristics of our student population from previous installments in this series, these two Fact Sheets provide additional information consistent with the following research model:

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*DISPLAY A: A Research Model*



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### What are the key elements of schooling?

Most of us probably agree that key elements of schooling include:

- ♦ A rigorous curriculum that is rich, comprehensive, and robust in substance;
- ♦ Staff -- both teachers and administrators -- that generate excitement about learning along with the ability to transmit the knowledge and skills comprising the curriculum;
- ♦ Physical resources that provide adequate learning environments, including facilities and laboratories that are well-equipped and a supply of books and materials;
- ♦ Support services that assist students to achieve their potential through academic advisement, personal counseling, and health-related assistance; and,
- ♦ Perhaps most important of all, the expectation that every child can learn to high standards and a commitment to assist each and every student to reach those standards.

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### Do our schools currently have these elements in place?

Answering this question poses significant policy and research issues as well as consideration of our individual and collective values. Moreover, the answer to this question may be different depending upon the unit of analysis: the state level or the school level.

#### *State level:*

The Education Trust, a national organization to “promote high academic achievement for all students, at all levels, kindergarten through college” has recently published a State and National Data Book that reviews the status of each state with respect to certain relevant school characteristics. As such, it provides a comparative benchmark from which to view our schools. While some of the information presented by the Trust that is included in this Update and accompanying Fact Sheets may be several years old, these trends have changed only slightly:

- ♦ For every \$1,000 of annual personal income in 1991-92, Californians spent \$35 on elementary and secondary education. Compared to other states and the District of Columbia, California was 43 of 51 on this indicator of financial investment. By 1996, that figure had risen by only \$1.
- ♦ While almost all our high school students took Algebra, less than 10 percent enrolled in Calculus in high school during the 1993-94 year; almost 85 percent of our students took Biology but less than 20 percent enrolled in Physics. California ranked 31 out of 39 states reporting this information.
- ♦ In 1990-91, over one-quarter of our secondary school classes were taught by faculty who lacked even a minor in the subject -- a percentage that was surpassed by only four other states.
- ♦ In the 1996-97 fiscal year, our state spent \$ 4,287 per student enrolled in our public schools compared to over \$8,200 in New York in 1994, for example.

#### *School level:*

While these indicators identify aggregate educational challenges for our state, equally or more troublesome is the wide variation that exists in terms of the extent to which these key elements of good schooling are present in each of our schools. To be sure, certain schools in our state have excellent staff who function in well-equipped and

physically attractive surroundings where students are exposed to a quality curriculum and achieve a high level of academic success. Likewise, the opposite extremes exist throughout our state -- a situation that is disadvantageous for the students and dysfunctional for the future of California.

Among the measures of schooling that vary across the state are:

- ♦ The gap in expenditures for education between the high-spending and low-spending school districts in our state in the 1991-92 year was \$1,392 -- a figure that placed our state at approximately the 30th percentile nationally. Today, that gap has risen to \$4,480.
- ♦ Not all our schools offer academic enrichment programs; over 10 percent of our high schools do not offer any Advanced Placement courses.
- ♦ There is differential availability of counseling services -- both academic and personal.
- ♦ Substantial differences with respect to the availability of consumable supplies and instructional materials permeate our elementary and secondary school system as well as disparities in facilities and access to computer technology.

Perhaps, the most disturbing part of this statewide picture is that many of the disparities noted above are consistently and pervasively related to the socioeconomic and racial-ethnic composition of the student bodies in schools as well as the geographical location of schools. That is, schools in our low socioeconomic communities as well as our neighborhoods with a predominance of Black and Latino families often have dilapidated facilities, few or inadequate science laboratories, teachers in secondary schools providing instruction in classes for which they have no credential, curriculum that is unimaginative and boring, and teachers who change schools yearly and lack the professional development to complement their teaching with new instructional strategies and materials. Often, the standards in these schools are low and our students have little motivation to exceed these low expectations. This same description is applicable to many of our schools in rural areas of our state.

On the other hand, in our more affluent communities or in our suburbs -- neighborhoods that tend to be populated primarily by White families -- schools are more apt to be new or well-preserved. The science laboratories have

state-of-the-art equipment, teachers are credentialed in the subjects that they teach, the curriculum and libraries exude excitement, and professional development of teachers is a continuous process.

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### **Within a school, are the key elements described above accessible to all students?**

The answer to this question is "No." In too many of our schools, the practice of "tracking" remains -- a practice that affords only some of our children the opportunity to take classes that are challenging, rigorous, and taught by faculty with solid expertise in the specific subject matter. These classes are designed to prepare our students for college or for occupations requiring high level skills. The other classes tend to be less rigorous and engaging; the teachers not necessarily credentialed in the fields in which they are teaching; and, the expectations of performance for our students not nearly as demanding as in the "college preparatory" track.

In the early grades, tracking is most clearly evident in the extremes of the placement continuum: the "Gifted and Talented Program" -- a set of academic enrichment classes and activities at the elementary and secondary level -- to the "Special Education Program" for our students with disabilities and those considered to need instruction outside regular classrooms. At the high school level, accessibility to Advanced Placement courses plays a similar role to the Gifted and Talented Program in that these classes are especially designed for our students who are considered to be college-bound and capable of learning high level skills.

Placement in these various programs continues to be persistently related to racial-ethnic differences among our students and are likely reflective of socioeconomic variations as well. Display AA in the *Schooling in California* Fact Sheet presents information on various program enrollments for the 1994-95 year:

- ♦ To some extent, the proportional representation in the Special Education program was reflective of the racial-ethnic composition of the general school population; the most disparate representation occurred with respect to our Asian students who comprised less of the Special Education population than might be expected on the basis of their proportion among the general school population; our Black and White students constituted a larger proportion of the Special Education population than might have been expected.

- ♦ Proportionally, more of our Asian and White students were enrolled in the Gifted and Talented Program than in the general school population, while proportionally fewer of our Black and Latino students had those opportunities than expected on the basis of their presence in the total school population in California.
- ♦ Our Asian students have proportionally larger representation in our Advanced Placement courses than in the general public school population; our Black and Latino students are considerably less well represented in these courses than in the general school population.

A similar pattern is evident when examining enrollments in individual courses that are preparatory for college admissions. Display BB in the *Schooling in California* Fact Sheet indicates a wide range in the proportion of our students from various racial-ethnic groups who take higher level mathematics and science courses:

- ♦ Our Asian (including Filipino) students tend to take Intermediate Algebra, Advanced Mathematics, Chemistry, and Physics in greater proportions than our students from any other racial-ethnic group;
- ♦ Our White students enroll in these courses in proportions similar to those of Asian students;
- ♦ Our Black, Latino, and Native American students are least likely to take these college preparatory classes than our students from any other racial-ethnic group.

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### **What inferences can be drawn about the extent to which educational opportunities are equitably distributed currently throughout our public school system?**

While the information presented in this Update lacks uniformity or consistency with respect to reporting years, it reveals an uneven distribution of educational opportunities and resources throughout our state. That is, at both the school and student level, evidence indicates that opportunities to learn in well-equipped and modern environments characterized by rigorous and exciting curricula from teachers credentialed in the subjects that they teach with support services to maximize student potential are simply unavailable to all of our students in California. Rather, if one of our students attends a school in a more affluent community, the likelihood is greater that there will be an abundance of educational resources available to prepare him or her for postsecondary educational options

upon high school graduation. If, on the other hand, one of our students is from a Black or Latino family or from a rural community, it is less likely that the school that she or he attends will be well-endowed either in terms of human or physical resources or that this student will be enrolled in a rigorous college preparatory sequence of classes.

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### **Are family and community resources available to supplement those of the schools?**

Like the school system itself, the extent to which supplemental resources are available is dependent primarily upon the socioeconomic level of a student's family and neighborhood. The more affluent a student's family or neighborhood, the more likely that supplemental resources are available to bolster educational opportunities: in the home, those resources may be more books or computer capacity or more traveling experiences; in the community, supplemental resources may include educational enrichment programs or support services or access to cultural activities. As such, the availability of supplementary educational assistance from our families and communities tends to parallel the opportunities available in our schools.

Additionally, socioeconomic differences have other effects on educational opportunities. A strong relationship exists between family income and parental educational level. That is, in more affluent families and communities, the likelihood is great that there are more role models and informational sources who can speak authoritatively and from experience about college and the opportunities that flow from pursuing that goal. In less affluent communities, college attendance may not be a tradition and our students choosing that path may find encouragement but a lack of information about the college-going process.

Another aspect of differences in the availability of family and community resources on postsecondary educational opportunities relates to parental involvement in the educational lives of their children. Display CC in the *Schooling in California* Fact Sheet presents the findings from a recent study conducted by the United States Department of Education that examined the extent to which parental involvement -- in this case, from fathers -- is related to the achievement of their children in school. The study results indicated that students from families in which parents are involved with their children's education performed at a much higher level than in those instances when parents were less involved, irrespective of whether the parents lived together or separately.



In short, differences in socio-economic circumstances do appear to affect educational opportunities for our students in myriad ways. Differential opportunities are related to the amount of discretionary income available to afford material possessions and experiences that are educational in nature. Additionally, accessibility to income that is above subsistence level provides time that family members can spend on educational activities and involvement. These critical elements -- physical materials, educational experiences, and time -- are simply not equitably distributed to all our children but, rather, reflect the same patterns of inequity as found in the schools.

The unevenness of supplemental resources as a result of socioeconomic differences among families and communities has racial-ethnic and geographic dimensions as well. Students from Black and Latino communities and rural areas tend to be from families in which there is little or no experience with college. The import of these findings relates far less to differential aspirations that parents from various backgrounds and communities may have for their children than to their capacity to assist their daughters and sons in fulfilling those goals.

In short, as The Achievement Council has stated:

Into the education of poor and minority children, we put less of everything we believe makes a difference. Less experienced and well-trained teachers. Less instructional time. Less rich and well-balanced curricula. Less well-equipped facilities. And less of what may be most important of all: a belief that these youngsters can really learn.

This is compounded by the fact that some communities have less, too. Less knowledge about how the educational system works. Less ability to help with homework. Less money to finance educational extras. Less stability in the neighborhood. Fewer models of success. And hopes and dreams that are too often crushed by harsh economic conditions (Unfinished Business, The Achievement Council, 1990, p. 18).

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### **What, then, do we know about student outcomes in our schools?**

Several measures exist with respect to student outcomes in our schools:

- ♦ The one-year “dropout” rate for students in Grades 9 through 12 has declined from 1992-93 to 1995-96

(Display DD, *Schooling in California* Fact Sheet). Encouragingly, this rate has decreased for all student groups. Despite this positive trend, there is unevenness along racial-ethnic dimensions with respect to the likelihood that a student will leave school prior to graduation;

- ♦ The proportion of our students statewide who have completed the college preparatory course sequences required for admission to our public universities with a grade of C or better has increased since 1990 (Display 1, *Preparation of California High School Students for College* Fact Sheet). This trend is consistent across all racial-ethnic groups, although there was some decrease in these percentages for our Black, Latino, and Native American students between 1995 and 1996 -- an exacerbation of an existing gap;
- ♦ Increasingly, more of our students are enrolling in Advanced Placement courses and taking the tests for which these courses prepare students (Display 2, *Preparation of California High School Students for College* Fact Sheet). Again, while this trend is in a positive direction, there remain large differences among racial-ethnic groups in their enrollment in these courses and, subsequently, in taking the AP tests;
- ♦ Participation in, and performance on, college admissions tests has risen over time (Display 3, *Preparation of California High School Students* Fact Sheet). The trend is evident for all student groups, although persistent differences in both participation and performance remain; and
- ♦ Historical comparisons in the rates of eligibility for the California State University and University of California have vacillated over time, particularly as admissions requirements changed. In 1990, the last year for which information is currently available, eligibility rates rose above those in the 1986 year. Nevertheless, the proportion of our students eligible to attend these public university systems was significantly related to geographic location and racial-ethnic background. It remains to be seen whether the 1996 Eligibility Study reveals a narrowing of these differences.

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### **Conclusion**

If the research model presented in Display A above is an accurate representation of the factors that affect student

achievement and outcomes, then the unevenness in terms of the distribution of wealth, educational level, and occupations discussed in previous installments in this series -- coupled with those in this piece that relate to school, family, and community resources -- predicted these differences in student outcomes. The issue, then, of “fairness”

or equity which has been a dominant theme in recent discussions about educational practices in our state must be addressed as a major public policy concern far earlier in the educational lives of our children than just during the college admissions process. That process will be the focus of the next installment in this series.

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